

Sgt. Coleman S. Bean Individual Ready Reserve Suicide Prevention Act' Would Honor Fallen New Jersey Iraq War Veteran

(Washington, D.C.) – U.S. Rep. Rush Holt announced today he has introduced legislation to fill a void in the military's suicide prevention efforts among members of the Individual Ready Reserve (IRR) and for other soldiers who are designated as Individual Mobilization Augmentees (IMAs). Unlike their active duty counterparts or those normally assigned to existing Guard and Reserve units, members of the IRR and those designated as IMAs normally are only assigned to units upon mobilization. In between deployments, they lack direct, easy access to the kinds of suicide prevention services and support structures available to active duty troops - a deficiency Holt's bill seeks to fix. Joining Holt in offering the bill were Rep. George Miller (D-CA), Rep. Carol Shea-Porter (D-NH), Rep. Jim Himes (D-CT), Rep. Shelley Berkley (D-NV), and Rep. Roscoe Bartlett (R-MD).

The bipartisan bill is named in honor of the late Sergeant Coleman S. Bean of East Brunswick, New Jersey. In between and after two combat tours in Iraq, Bean sought treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Because Sgt. Bean was a member of the Individual Ready Reserve, he could not get treatment for his condition because the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs refused to take ownership of him and the thousands like him.

"Two federal agencies charged with helping prevent suicides among our returning troops utterly failed Sgt. Bean and his family", said Holt. "We cannot allow another family to lose a son or daughter, a father or mother, a husband or a wife because of bureaucratic buck-passing."

Holt's bill would do the following:

Require the Secretary of Defense to ensure that members of the IRR who have served at least one tour in either Iraq or Afghanistan will receive a counseling call from properly trained personnel not less than once every 90 days so long as the servicemember remains a member of the IRR.

Require personnel conducting this call to determine the emotional, psychological, medical, and career needs and concerns of the IRR member. Any IRR member identified as being at risk of harming his or her self would be referred immediately to the nearest military treatment facility or accredited TRICARE provider for immediate evaluation and treatment by a qualified mental health care provider, and in those cases the Secretary would be required to confirm that the at-risk IRR member has received the evaluation, and if necessary treatment.

Require the Secretary of Defense, beginning in January 2011, to report to the Congress not less than yearly on the number of IRR members not assigned to units who have been referred for counseling or mental health treatment, as well as the health and career status of said servicemembers.

On June 25, 2009, a nearly identical version of the Holt bill passed the House on a voice vote as an amendment to the Fiscal Year 2010 National Defense Authorization Act (H.R. 2647). Unfortunately, an anonymous Senate conferee objected to the provision during the conference report negotiations, arguing it was too costly – even though no member of the Senate ever requested that the Congressional Budget Office score the provision.

“How anyone could believe that our government can’t afford to make suicide prevention phone calls to veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars is as baffling as it is callous,” said Holt. “I urge all House and Senate members to join me in taking this simple step to help all our IRR and IMA servicemembers get access to the suicide prevention counseling and support that they need and deserve.”

Linda Bean, mother of Sgt. Bean, offered her support for the legislation.

“Through this legislation, Congressman Holt directly addresses the mental health needs of the more than 11,000 IRR soldiers and countless individual augmentees who have deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan, a population that is underserved by both the military and VA mental health systems. We are grateful.

“Since Coleman’s death, we have come to know that one phone call – just one honest

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expression of compassion – can help catch and hold someone who is at the edge of despair. For us, if the phone calls mandated by this legislation help save one life – then that is blessing enough.”

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